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CAMP-FIRES OF THE G. A. R.

A RECENT visit to Columbus, Ohio, September 10-14, convinces me that the young people, male and female, of the interior of our country feel an increased interest in the events of the Civil War.

I did believe, and may have so expressed myself in former years, that the interest, enthusiasm and élan would die out with one or two generations ; but not so. There were present at Columbus as many ex-soldiers, their wives, children and families, as could have been assembled in 1865 ; as many as forty thousand ex-soldiers and sixty thousand citizens, male and female, other than the resident population (eighty thousand) of that capital city. This is not a mere guess, but a professional estimate based on numbers and measurements made on the spot. The same or similar results have been noted at Toledo, Indianapolis, Springfield and St. Paul. The people of the great Northwest, whose first centennial was in part the occasion of the recent meeting at Columbus, are more peculiarly *American* than similar crowds elsewhere, and give us one element of value in the problem of integral calculus for the "*next centennial*."

I mingled with this crowd in halls, in great tents and on the streets—and though individuals took liberties with my hand and person not contemplated by army regulations, I will bear witness that in the four days of my stay I did not hear a coarse word, see a single drunken man, or observe any infraction of the common police regulations for crowds. I have known Columbus from boyhood, and am sure the people to-day are better and more refined than they were fifty years ago. In accomplishing this result the Civil War and the Grand Army of the Republic have been important factors; and in this paper I desire to invite public attention to one feature of the Grand Army of the Republic—its "camp-fire." The mere name suggests its object. Imagine a group of intelligent soldiers after night—the march done—supper over, and things put away for an early start—a clear sky above and a bright fire beneath, you have the perfection of human comfort, and the most perfect incentive to good fellowship. Of course

to make the scene more perfect there must enter the element of danger, but that is now past, and the "camp-fire" of the Grand Army is a mere assemblage of comrades absolutely on an equal footing, regardless of former rank, yet subject to self-imposed discipline; the comrades may be seated round their hall or at tables, with the simplest and cheapest fare, when they sing their old war songs, tell their old war stories, or in the soldiers phrase "swap lies," and transact their business of "charity." Now at this very hour around their many camp-fires are being spun the yarns which in time will be the warp and woof of history. For mathematical accuracy, one should go to the interesting tables of statistics compiled by adjutants general, but for the living, radiant truth, commend me to the "camp-fire." My memory of camp-fires goes back to the everglades of Florida, and the days of the trappers in the Rockies and California; and people who suppose these men were rude, coarse and violent, are sadly mistaken. Roubidoux was the gentlest, least offensive man I ever saw; but if a thieving Pi-Ute tried at night to steal his picketed mule, he became a good, *i. e.*, a dead, Indian. Kit Carson always avoided danger, sometimes would go two or three days out of his course to avoid danger, but when it stared him in the face his eye was as clear as crystal, and his nerves as steady as forged steel. Carson was usually taciturn, but on occasions would "swop lies" with the most expert. F. X. Aubry was to me the most satisfactory, because with paper and pencil he could delineate the country passed over, and describe its features as to wood, water and grass, all that man and horse needed in those halcyon days. The Bents, Campbells and St. Vrain were traders of a higher type than the trappers. Of this latter class, Jim Bridger always at a camp-fire carried off the palm. One night after supper, when gathered round a real camp-fire on Bear Creek, a comrade inquired: "Jim, were you ever down at Zuni?" "No! there are no beaver thar." "But, Jim, there are some things in this world besides beaver. I was down there last winter and saw great trees with limbs and bark on, all turned into stone." "Oh!" rejoined Jim, "them's called petrifications; come with me to the Yellowstone next summer and I will show you petrified trees a-growing, with petrified birds singing petrified songs." Now, it so happens that I have been to the Yellowstone, have seen the petrified trees

"a-growing," but not the petrified birds or petrified songs. The geysers of the Yellowstone at intervals eject hot water super-saturated with carbonate of lime and geyserite to a height of a hundred and fifty feet. This water is carried as mist laterally by the wind two or three hundred feet, saturating growing trees, gradually converting that side to stone, while the off side has living branches. So Jim Bridger's story was not *all* a lie, only partly so. Mr. Tiffany, of Union Square, is at this moment working up the petrified trees of Zuni and of the Little Colorado into exquisite ornaments.

There is an old maxim of the lawyer, "*Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*," good enough doctrine for the courts but not the "camp-fire." Does any man question the truth of *Gil Blas* or *Don Quixote*? Are not the *Pickwick* papers literally true? Or what American will permit a bloody Britisher to dispute the entire truth of *Rip Van Winkle*, or the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*? As well doubt that *Tam O'Shanter* saw the dance of witches and had a close call with his "Maggie" at the Bridge of Ayr. The camp-fire of the Grand Army of the Republic is only a continuation of what occurred "during the war," adding wit and romance to relieve the great mental strain when each soldier realized that the next day might be his last—he did not dread death, but mangling, wounds, the hospital and captivity, were ever present to his mind, sleeping or waking. These fears and apprehensions are now far in the past, and no wonder the soldiers of 1861–5 meet again at their camp-fires to "swap lies," and should they exaggerate their own powers and deeds of valor, I know that a sweet angel will blot out the sin. In illustration I will venture to give one of a thousand instances which have occurred to me personally.

After the war was over I was stationed in St. Louis with absolute command over all the region west of the Mississippi River to the Rockies, and gave much personal attention to the protection of the parties engaged in building the Pacific railroads west from Omaha and Kansas City, the country then being infested by the most warlike tribes of Indians on the continent, the Sioux, Kiowas, Arapahos and Cheyennes, who knew that the building of these railroads would result in the destruction of the buffalo, on whose meat they subsisted, and whose hides made their lodges. It was, in fact, a continuous warfare, following the close of the great Civil War, and though Congress utterly ignored the fact, I

had in Sheridan and Hancock, Terry and Augur, good lieutenants, and we won that war as we had previously the greater, but not more important one.

I was seated at my table at St. Louis in the office over a clothing store, corner of Washington avenue and Fourth street, absorbed in my subject, when I became conscious that a man in rough garb, with a broad brimmed hat, was addressing me—I had no sentinel or orderly. He grasped my hand familiarly, called me Uncle Billy, was delighted to see me in apparent good health, inquired about the family, and finally announced that he was “dead broke,” and must raise \$26.50 some how to get his trunk out of pawn, and to reach his home in Ohio. I naturally inquired what claim had he on me. Oh! of course, he was one of my boys; he had been a lieutenant in the —th Ohio Cavalry; had fought with me at Chattanooga, Knoxville, Atlanta, etc., and being a perfect stranger in St. Louis, had come to me as his “uncle.” He did not remove his hat, which made me suspicious, still he gave correct date and place for every event of his regiment, from Iuka, Miss., to Raleigh, N. C. At last he tripped. “Don’t you remember, General,” he said, “the Grand Day at Washington when we passed the President in review, that was a glorious day——” “Yes, my good sir,” said I, “I left the —th Ohio at Raleigh with Kilpatrick.” With hat still on, he pondered some minutes, and then, with beaming face, “Uncle Billy, it was not *all* a lie; I confess I lied some, but I was in truth a lieutenant in the —th Ohio cavalry, and have since the war been out on the plains as a teamster, and have told the story so often that I believed it myself; the story is true up to Raleigh, but after that it is fiction. The Cheyennes jumped our train near Fort Wallace, got the mules, burned the wagons, and left me on the ground scalped and dead. The soldiers came out from the fort, took me into the hospital, where I was kindly and skillfully treated, and got well, but the scalp is gone.” With that he removed his hat, bowed his head, and the “hair was gone.”

This was the reason why in my presence he had not stood “hat in hand” in the presence of his superior officer as he should have done. It so happened that I had been to Fort Wallace about the time when that train was “jumped,” and General A. J. Smith also happened to be near by at the time, confirmed the general fact. So that among us we raised the \$26.50 to get

his trunk out of pawn, and buy a ticket for him to his home in Ohio. I have completely forgiven him, and have never seen him since.

A somewhat similar circumstance occurred to General Zachary Taylor in 1850—then President of the United States—as told me by one of his household. General Taylor was a magnificent type of the soldier of his day and generation ; had served in the Regular Army on the frontier continuously from 1808 till 1849, when he was elected President of the United States chiefly by reason of his sturdy manly qualities and his brilliant success at the battle of Buena Vista, Mexico, February 22, 1847. In this battle General Taylor with an army of 5,000 volunteers defended his position against 21,000 Mexican regulars, led in person by General Santa Anna, President and Commander-in-Chief of Mexico.

When in March, 1849, General Taylor was installed in his office of President, he was furiously assailed for place and office by his old war comrades. Among these was a citizen of Mississippi, who sent on his petition to be made postmaster of his town, professing to be a “good Whig,” was indorsed by his neighbors, but rested his claims chiefly on the fact that he was in the First Mississippi at Buena Vista. He expected his appointment by return mail, but not receiving it, as is usual, he went to Washington to learn the reason why. Obtaining access to the Postmaster-General (Collamer, of Vermont), he was simply disgusted that in Washington the great and bloody battle of Buena Vista was held secondary to the Whig vote of North Carolina. So our Mississippi candidate pushed his way into the White House, and laid his claims for office before President Taylor. He described the ridge at Buena Vista projecting toward the road by which the Mexicans were approaching in solid phalanx—how the First Mississippi formed line to the front, then changed to the left to repel the attack ; again changed front to the right, and last doubled column on the centre and charged, driving the bloody Mexicans off the field.

General Taylor listened with great patience, as was his habit, but when the embryo postmaster slackened in his eloquence and gave him a chance, he answered : “I used to think I was at the battle of Buena Vista myself, but since I have come to Washington, I have heard of so many things which happened down there, that I am convinced I was not there at all.” My inference is that

the self-constituted Mississippi hero never became a postmaster for Uncle Sam. And I also hear of so many things which happened at Dalton, Resacca, Marietta, Atlanta, that I am inclined to believe that the man who marched down to the sea was another fellow of the same name as myself. Nevertheless, for this very reason I believe in modern "camp-fires." They afford opportunities for wit and humor, they prick the bubbles of the boastful and stamp as genuine the pure gold of heroic action and of patient endurance. No man can, to-day, go to a camp-fire of any Grand Army Post, and successfully boast of deeds not genuine without certain exposure. Brothers reared under the same roof know and love each other well, but a day, or week, or year of war comradeship in the same company begets a knowledge of character not possible elsewhere. In peace we must accept a man on his own word. Not so in war; the truth is then revealed, as it were, by the lightning's flash. In the twinkling of an eye, we segregate the true from the false, the brave from the timid, the earnest from the doubtful.

There were then (1850) no Grand Army posts, now there are over four thousand, and the amount of good and charity done by them cannot be measured by dollars and cents. For years after the war our men wandered over the land seeking the employment they had given up to take a musket to save the union and government. Of course that crisis is now past, but a greater danger lurks—the next generation may conclude that the wise man stays at home, and leaves the fool to take the buffets and kicks of war. This danger can best be met by just such an organization as the Grand Army of the Republic, with its camp-fires of song and story, to irradiate the gloom of ordinary humdrum existence where an Auditor of the Treasury would measure a "life" as he would a bushel of spoiled oats.

All I mean by this paper is to encourage the men who "saved the Union" to be of good cheer; to meet often at camp-fires; sing their old songs; tell their stories with reasonable exaggerations, and always cultivate the comradeship begotten of war, the charity which blesses him who gives as well as him who receives, and a loyalty that ordains that the "penalty for treason is death."

W. T. SHERMAN.